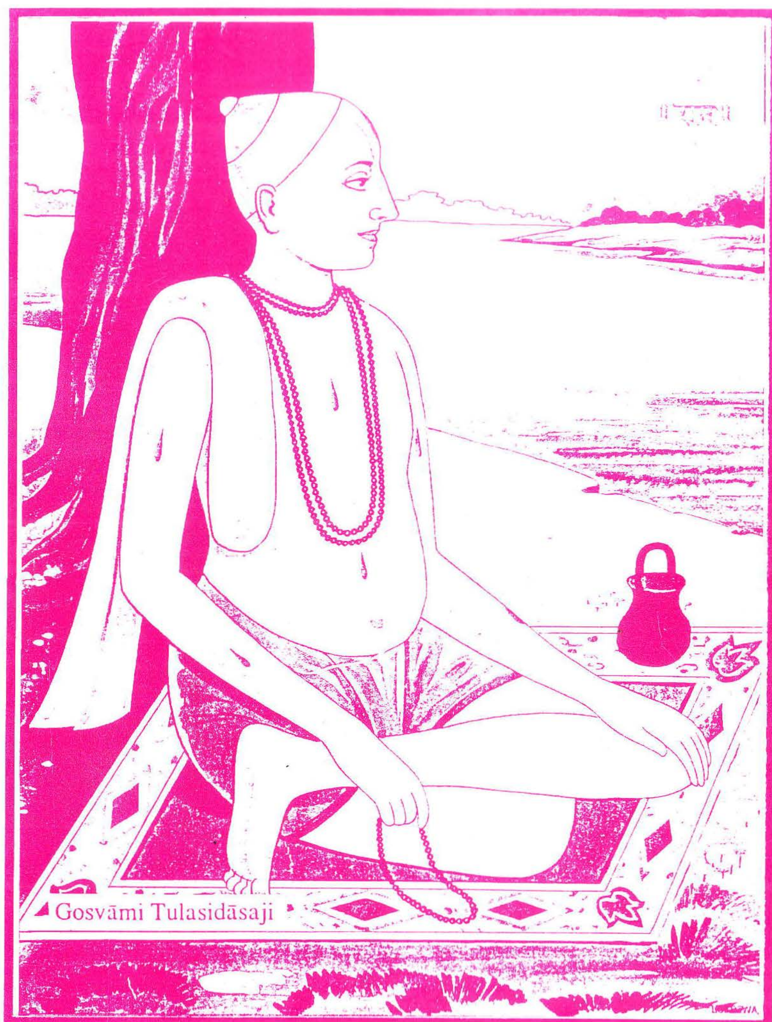
The Seven Questions of Garuda



Anantanand Rambachan

Dedicated to the memory of Gosvāmi Tulasidāsajī,
author of the Rāmacaritamānasa, on the occasion of the
celebration of his five hundredth birth anniversary

बंदौं गुरपद कंज कृपासिंधु नररूप हरि ।
महामोह तम पुंज जासु बचन रबिकर निकर

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Rama Darshan: The Valmiki-Rama Dialogue
Ravana: Power Without Virtue

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Preface

Tulasidasa concludes the Ramayana with a lengthy conversation between Garuda, the king of birds, and Kakabhushundi, a crow.[1] Garuda was once troubled by doubts about the nature of Rama and sought the help of the sage, Narada. Narada directed him to Brahma, but Brahma sent him to Shiva. Finally, Shiva sent him to the crow, Kakabhushundi.

The fact that Garuda, the king of birds in Hindu mythology, goes to Kakabhushundi, a lowly crow, is symbolically significant. A sincere student must be prepared to learn from any qualified teacher and the teacher must not be judged on the basis of appearance or status in society. One who is born in humble and despised circumstances can be the teacher of one who enjoys social honor and prestige. A teacher is to be judged only by his or her wisdom and character and may be found where one least expects.

The discussion between Garuda and Kakabhushundi in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* is a lengthy one, but the following commentary deals with seven brief questions (*sapta prasna*) asked by Garda and the answers of Kakabhushundi. Many essential elements of Hindu ethics and religious belief are covered in these answers.

I wish to thank my wife, Geeta, for her partnership and support in all that I write. This small work was written upon her suggestion and incorporates many of her suggestions. My thanks also to Craig Rice for his generosity with his time and expertise. One cannot ask more of a friend and colleague.

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[1]Some scholars have suggested that the medieval *Bhuṣuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* may have been a significant influence on Tulasidasa and that the teachings of the crow represent the poet's own views. This text,however, has not been preserved. For a good summary of these views see Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), pp. 224-226.

(I)

The Most Difficult Form to Obtain

Garuda: What form is the most difficult of all to obtain?

Kakabhushundi: The human form is the most excellent of all and all beings, moving and unmoving desire it. It is the ladder that takes one to heaven or to hell or to liberation and is the bestower of the blessings of wisdom, detachment and devotion. Those who have attained this form and yet do not worship God but devote themselves only to sense gratification throw away the philosopher's stone from the palm of their hand and clutch bits of common glass. [2]

If we examine the characteristics of all living beings, we notice many common features such as growth, respiration, movement, nutrition and excretion. Human beings share many biological attributes with the members of other species and the latter are often superior to us in their physical abilities. We can hardly match the power of

speed, sight, hearing and smell in many members of the animal species.

As human beings, however, we are distinguished by our ability to think rationally, to gain knowledge and to use that knowledge to improve the conditions of our lives. Our behavior is not dictated entirely by physical instinct. We can gather information, make choices and act on the basis of our choices to a degree which is not possible for any other species. Our achievements are based on the exercise of these special capacities. We have the ability and obligation to take responsibility for our lives and to control our destiny. For these reasons, the human form is the most excellent of all forms, but it also entrusts us with the greatest responsibility.

The Ramayana uses a familiar example to help us understand what it means to be human. The example here is that of a ladder which offers the possibility of movement in an upward or downward direction. Like a ladder, the human body is an instrument which we may use to grow and evolve spiritually or which we may abuse to bring about our own downfall. If our understanding is clouded by ignorance, and if our choices and actions are false, we will create a hellish existence *(naraka)* filled with unhappiness. We may, on the other hand, create a heavenly existence *(svarga)* of happiness through right understanding and action. We also have the freedom to attain the highest end of human existence (*apabarga* or *moksha*) which is a state of peace and joy not subject to loss or change. It is the opportunity for attaining such a peace and joy that makes human existence a rare privilege and gift.

Human birth is held up as the most excellent because it is the means for the attainment of wisdom, detachment and devotion. Wisdom *(jñāna)* is the ability to distinguish the eternal from the non-eternal. When one understands that there is something which is eternal and which is of the nature of peace and joy, one chooses not to give the highest value to those things which are perishable and non-eternal. One recognizes the eternal as the true goal of one's quest. This detachment from the perishable is called *birāga* or *vairāgya*, while attachment or love for the eternal is called *bhagati* or *bhakti.*

Those who have attained a human birth and do not use it for knowing and loving the imperishable God, but only devote themselves to goals and ends which are perishable, are like fools who renounce a priceless gift for that which is cheap and deceptive.

The purpose of the Ramayana, in this answer, is to awaken us to a sense of the incomparable worth and rarity of our human existence and to urge us to appreciate its value. It is a reminder that we must not take our lives for granted or abuse it through neglect or life-choices which destroy our mental and physical abilities. Every human life is precious and we are called upon to value each life as much as we value our own. Hinduism requires us to challenge and oppose anything which devalues and demeans human beings and which strips them of dignity and worth.[3]

[2]*nara tana sama nahi kavaniu dehī*
jīva carācara jācata jehī
naraka svarga apabarga nisenī
jñāna birāga bhagati subha denī

so tanu dhari hari bhajahiṁ na je nara
hohiṁ biṣaya rata maṁda maṁda tara
kāṁcu kirica badale te lehīṁ
kara teṁ ḍāri parasamani dehīṁ (Uttarakāṇḍa)

[3]Compare Kakabhushundi's answer with Rama's instruction earlier in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. See *Rama Gīta*, Ch.6.

(II)

The Greatest Suffering

Garuda: What is the greatest suffering?

Kakabhushundi: There is no suffering in the world as great as poverty.[4]

In this answer of Kakabhushundi we have a refutation of the misunderstanding that Hinduism is anti-materialistic or that it gives no value to prosperity in the world. The lack of adequate housing, nutritious meals, clean water, clothing, sanitation and the resources for raising a family are for millions in our world basic causes of pain and suffering. Hinduism never glorifies or condones such oppressive living conditions and requires that we exert ourselves through honest means to satisfy our material needs and to help others do the same.

If we live in conditions of extreme poverty, it is very difficult for our minds to be concerned with anything but the next meal or drink of water. When our basic

material needs are satisfied, our minds are freed, if we so choose, to turn to higher concerns.

Wealth, in the Hindu understanding, is a means and not an end. As we saw earlier, the glory of the human form lies in the opportunity which it offers for knowing the imperishable. The fulfillment of human existence is not to be found in the accumulation of wealth.

We are always faced with the temptation of becoming preoccupied with the accumulation of wealth and making it the end of our lives rather than a means. When this occurs, we condemn ourselves to remain poor forever. We are continuously plagued by the feeling that we never have enough, even when all of our material needs are decently satisfied. As long as such feelings persist, contentment and happiness will remain elusive and beyond our reach.

Poverty, therefore, must also be understood as a state of mind and not only as a condition of material deprivation. A human being experiences poverty in relation to anything which he or she desires continuously. If I have the urge to dominate and exercise control over others, I am in poverty for power. Similarly, if I desire praise and applause from each person I meet, I am poor for adulation. It is sometimes much more difficult to free oneself from such kinds of poverty and these can be greater causes of unhappiness and discontent than poverty for basic material things. Poverty of the mind can only be overcome by discovering the eternal which is the true source of peace and contentment. Hinduism repeatedly

cautions us about the dangers of allowing ourselves to become victims of greed in its various forms.

> Threefold is the gate of hell, leading to the destruction of the self: desire, anger and greed. Therefore, one should give up these three.[5]

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[4] *nahi daridra sama dukha jaga māhīṁ (Uttarakāṇḍa)*
[5] *Bhagavadgītā* 16:21

(III)

The Highest Pleasure

Garuda: What is the highest pleasure?

Kakabhushundi: There is no pleasure like that which results from association with saintly persons.[6]

The Ramayana speaks repeatedly and eloquently about the benefits of association with the saintly. At the commencement of the text, Tulasidasa remarks that one does not attain wisdom without associating with the saints and that the opportunity for such association is a gift of God's grace.[7] In Rama's instruction to Sabari about the nine characteristics of the devotional life, the first which he mentions is associating with the saintly.[8]

Why is there such a great emphasis on association with good people? In the first chapter, we discussed some of the differences between human beings and members of other species. Another important difference will help us to understand the importance of *satsanga* or association with the virtuous.

Let us imagine that one took a dog from its mother soon after birth and raised it apart from the company of other dogs. How would this dog behave? In most respects, it will behave like a dog. It will bark, walk and eat like other dogs since its behavior is controlled by instinct and environment does not alter these basic patterns. If we did the same with a human baby and left it in the care of dogs, the results will be dramatically different. The child would imitate the dog's bark, walk, eating and sleeping habits. The point is that we human beings are the most dependent of all species upon other members of our species for our growth and development. We cannot develop into human beings apart from a community of human beings.

We are deeply influenced by the thoughts, ideas and behavior of those with whom we spend the most time and associate most closely. It is easy for us to understand, therefore, the significance of the Hindu emphasis on associating with virtuous people. This is the best method for building good character, especially in the formative years of human growth and development.

The influence which we have upon each other entrusts us all, especially adults, with an important responsibility since we are continuously shaping the lives of children. We do so as parents, teachers, relatives, neighbors and members of a community. We need to be aware of this and of the ideals and examples we are, intentionally or unintentionally, holding up for our children. We need to be aware also of the values and beliefs of those who exert influence on our children. Who are my children's friends? Who do they admire? Who are their

heroes? What are they learning from them? Are these the values which I desire to transmit to my children? These are questions which we must not ignore.

The traditional meaning of *satasanga* is the company of virtuous persons. Today, however, we spend time associating with the ideas, values and example of others in many different ways. We do so through books, magazines, videos and television programs. These are great sources of influence on our children and on us. We must ensure that they affect us in a healthy and positive manner and that they do not undermine the values which we cherish and wish to preserve.

Why is the happiness which comes from association with the saintly described to be like none other? Saints help us to find God who is perfect happiness and peace. On attaining God, we also discover a happiness which is not subject to change or loss. The pleasure which comes to us from the enjoyment of sense objects is not lasting. In God alone, we find timeless joy.

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[6] *saṁta milana sama dukha jaga nāhīṁ (Uttarakāṇḍa)*
[7] *binu satasaṁga bibeka na hoī*
rāmakṛpa binu sulabha na soī (Bālakāṇḍa)
[8] See *Rama Gītā*, Ch.2.

(IV)

The Good and the Evil

Garuda: What are the inherent characteristics of the good and the evil?

Kakabhushundi: To be charitable to others in thought, word and deed is the essential characteristic of the good. The good endure pain in the interest of others, but the evil do so to give others pain. The good, like the birch tree, submit to the greatest distress for the good of others. The evil, like the hemp, have their skin peeled off and perish in pain merely to bind others with rope. Listen Garuda, the evil, like snakes and rats, do harm to others even when they have no object of their own to gain.[9]

The essential characteristic of a good person is the readiness to serve others in thought, word and deed. There are, however, two important elements in the definition of Kakabhushundi. Let us examine each of these.

(i) *saṁta sahaja subhāu*: The term, *sahaja*, means natural or easy. It is the opposite of that which is forced

and unnatural. *Svabhava* is one's inherent nature or tendency. The point of the definition is that it is the natural disposition of a virtuous person to be charitable to others. Let us analyze this with the help of a familiar example.

Suppose you are playing with your child at the front of your house. She suddenly runs after a ball and stands in the middle of the road. At the same moment, you notice a car speeding towards her. How will you react? You will immediately run as fast as possible and lift your daughter out of harm's way. This is a natural response on your part as a parent. You do not pause to think about your decision or to weigh up the benefits to yourself of saving your child. You do not have to be compelled by others or forced into action. Your response is the natural one (*sahaja svabhava)* of a loving parent.

In a similar way, a good person is one in whom kindness to others is natural. She does not have to be compelled by the threat of punishment or induced by the promise of reward to be charitable to others. Where calculation or expectation of reward is involved, one's action becomes tainted by selfishness.[10]

(ii) *para upakāra bacana mana kāyā* : How do we recognize if we are growing in this kind of natural goodness? The Ramayana's answer is when we cultivate a harmony of thought, word and action. It is possible to speak kindly to another while our thoughts are unkind. It is possible also to do the correct action while speaking improper words and entertaining uncharitable thoughts. If a hungry person, for instance, comes to your door requesting a meal, you may offer a sandwich, but you do

so with anger for being disturbed and you issue a warning to the person not to return to your home. While such conduct is common, the ideal is a harmony of thought, word and action. Loving thoughts naturally inspire kind words and actions.

What is to be noted here also is that we can be kind to others in many ways. There are occasions when physical help is necessary and possible, but there are times when such help is either unnecessary or beyond your means. In such situations a kind word of support, comfort or advice may be offered. The Ramayana suggests also that there may be moments when a good thought towards another is an appropriate response. The ways of helping others are unlimited.

How far will a good person go towards helping another? Is help to be offered only when it is convenient? What happens if the act of doing good risks pain and suffering? The Ramayana answers unequivocally by telling us that a good person does not cease to be good in difficult times. The example used by Tulasidasa is that of the birch tree which has its bark stripped and converted into paper for writing. Pain and discomfort is endured by the tree because its bark serves the needs of others. The impressive fact is that the tree continues to replenish itself and produce new bark. It does not violate or contradict its natural tendency.[11]

While the good endure pain for the sake of others, the evil do so in order to cause pain to others (*para dukha hetu asaṁta abhāgī*). If a good person will go to any lengths for the happiness of another, an evil person will do

the same for the sake of another's unhappiness. Tulasidasa illustrates this with the example of the hemp plant. The fiber of the hemp plant is useful for manufacturing rope and string and its bark is stripped for this purpose. While the birch and the hemp trees are subjected to a similar process, the difference lies in the purpose for which the product is used. The birch benefits others while the rope of the hemp is used for binding and depriving others of their freedom. In one case, suffering is endured for the happiness of another, while, in the other case, it is endured for causing unhappiness to another.

Tulasidasa emphasizes the extent to which an evil person will go in order to cause pain to another by suggesting that such a person may even embrace death for this end. Evil, it seems, has become so habitual in some that they would injure others even when there are no tangible benefits to themselves. Sadly, they are ready to destroy themselves in order to destroy others.

Tulasidasa's discussion of the differences between the good and the evil emphasizes the importance, again, of seeking the company of the former and avoiding the latter. His analysis provides also a basis for helping us to recognize both types and, most importantly, for growing in goodness ourselves.

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[9] *para upākara bacana mana kāyā*
saṁta sahaja subhāu khagarāyā

saṁta sahahiṁ dukha parahita lāgī
para dukha hetu asaṁta abhāgī
bhūraja taru sama saṁta kṛpālā
para hita niti saha bipati bisālā

sana iva khala para baṁdhana karaī
khāla binu kaRhāi bipati sahi maraī
khala binu svāratha para apakārī
ahi mūṣaka iva sunu uragārī (Uttarakāṇḍa)

[10] See *Bhagavadgītā*, 17:20-22.

[11] Compare with Rama's example of the sandal tree. See *Rama Gītā*, Ch.3.

(V)

The Highest Virtue

Garuda: What is the highest religious virtue revealed in the scriptures?

Kakabhushundi: The highest religious virtue revealed in the scripture is to do no harm.[12]

The Ramayana's answer to this question should not surprise us. We have already noted the lofty regard for human life and the praise of the saintly person who is compassionate in thought, word and action. [13]

Ahiṁsā (non-violence), described here as the highest virtue, is another word for compassion and it is held, in the Hindu tradition, to be the most important moral virtue (*ahiṁsā paramo dharmaḥ*). The most famous practitioner of non-violence in recent times, Mahatma Gandhi, taught that *ahiṁsā* had two sides, a negative and positive. On the negative side, it requires that we strive to avoid pain and suffering to others by our thoughts, words

and actions. On the positive side, it requires the practice of love and compassion towards all.

While absolute non-violence may be an impractical ideal, we must endeavor to minimize violence as much as we can. This does not only apply to our treatment of other human beings, but to our relationship with animals and plants. These must also be brought within the circle of our love and compassion. The Hindu tradition does not limit the practice of non-violence to our treatment of other human beings.

Today, when we think of the meaning of *ahiṁsā*, we must not limit it to the avoidance of physical or verbal violence. Our understanding must be comprehensive. Violence is practiced in many forms and in various guises. Our definition of violence must include, racism and sexism, the inhuman treatment of workers in poor working conditions, inadequate salaries, the manufacture and distribution of addictive and mind-altering substances, domestic abuse, and the sexual exploitation of children. It must include risky behavior of any kind which endangers another's well-being. Rama clearlys had such a comprehensive view in mind in his teacting to his brother, Bharata, in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*.

> Brother, there is no religious duty like doing good to others and no sin equal to oppressing others. I have declared to you, dear brother, the verdict of the Vedas, Puranas and the learned.[14]

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[12]*parama dharma śruti bidita ahiṁsā (Uttarakāṇḍa)*

[13]Since I have commented on *ahiṁsā* in other works on the Ramayana, my remarks, in this context, will be brief. See *Love and Truth in the Ramayana of Tulsidas*, Ch.7. Also *Rama Gītā*, Chapters, 3&4.

[14]*para hita sarisa dharma nahiṁ bhāī*
para pīrā sama nahiṁ adhamāī
nirnaya sakala purāna beda kara
kaheuṁ tāta jānahiṁ kobida nara

(VI)

The Worst Sin

Garuda: What is the worst sin?

Kakabhushundi: There is no sin as awful as speaking ill of others.[15]

Speaking falsely about another is presented here, in the Ramayana, as the worst sin. Why? False speech causes pain to the victim of our verbal abuse and constitutes, therefore, a form of violence. It reflects a lack of care and compassion for others and is the opposite of the ideal of the virtuous person which we discussed earlier.

The deliberate proclamation of untruth about another is often the first step in the instigation of hate towards that person and this easily creates the conditions which make physical and other forms of violence possible. This holds true, for individuals, religious communities, ethnic groups and nations. False accusations by Adolf

Hitler against the Jews in Germany helped to create the conditions which made the Holocaust possible. Many of the conflicts across the world between various communities are perpetuated, in part, by the proclamation of stereotypes and untruths about the other. Virtuous persons cannot be indifferent to the dangers of such untruths and must act to challenge and refute them.

It is an unsaintly (*asaṁta*) quality to take delight in slandering another or to find pleasure in listening to such slander. In the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, Rama begins his description of the unsaintly character by identifying this habit.

> The heart of the wicked is a consuming fire which blazes at the sight of another's prosperity; but when they hear another abused, they are as happy as if they had found a treasure on the road.

Speaking falsely of others is a destructive human trait, and care must be exercised at all levels to avoid its practice. Proper examples must be set in the family, in the school, in the media and among political and community leaders for the careful and considerate use of language. We must recognize how powerful words are for good and evil purposes and use them with the utmost care when we speak of others. We must not participate in conversations where people appear to be enjoying the denigration of others. If such conversations cannot be avoided, and if we are unable to refute untrue accusations, we must choose to be silent.

Hinduism recognizes that there are times when it is impossible to avoid making critical judgments about others. Our work, for example, may require us to evaluate our colleagues or subordinates. The tradition, however, provides clear guidelines for such situations. Any judgments which we make must be rooted in truth (*satyaṁ)* and be based on fair and proper inquiry. The language of our report, whether verbal or oral, must be carefully chosen. Our words and tone ought to be as pleasant (*priyaṁ)* as possible and reflect respect for the dignity of others. Our aim and intention must be for the benefit (*hitaṁ*) of the other, even when we are called upon to be critical. There must be a constructive purpose in our criticism of others. If one is not scrupulous about one's motive, one is likely to use even the truth to dehumanize and demean others. This is not approved behavior in Hinduism.

A final reason for the injunction to avoid bearing false witness is the fact that one has no control over the word once it leaves one's lips and enters the ear of another. Repentance for a false word does not bring about its recall. It gains a life of its own and may endure for generations. It continues to cause pain long after the speaker has passed away from this world. For these reasons, the Ramayana condemns false speech in such strong terms.

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[15]*para niṁdā sama agha na garīsā (Uttarakāṇḍa)*

(VII)

The Diseases of the Mind

Garuda: What are the diseases of the mind?

Kakabhushundi: Ignorance is the root of all diseases and from these arise many other torments.[16]

In this concise answer, the Ramayana follows the philosophical traditions of Hinduism which identify ignorance (*avidyā* or *moha*) as the fundamental human problem. False values and improper actions originate from ignorance. Hinduism does not view human nature as inherently defective or sinful. Attitudes and actions which result in pain to the doer and to others arise from incorrect understanding of the nature of human existence and the world.

The goal and purpose of human existence is the attainment of God who is *sat-chit-ananda* (reality-awareness-bliss). God, however, being infinite, is not separated from us by place or time We do not have to

travel from one place to another to reach God who is everywhere and in whom all things exist. We do not have to wait for some special time in the future when God will be available. God is always present. Our inability to find God who is peace and joy is only as a consequence of our ignorance and the confused values to which it gives rise.

Where is God to be found? God exists in each of us as our true self, which is called, in Sanskrit, the *ātman*. "I am the self, Arjuna, abiding in the heart of all beings," teaches Krishna in the tenth chapter of the Bhagavadgītā. As the *ātman*, we are never separated from God. We are one with the divine. The *ātman* is immortal and never changes. It is happiness, which means that it has no lack or want, and is the same in everyone and everything.

Ignorant of our true self, we take ourselves to be the body which is born and which dies. We also identify with the mind which is restless and wanting. Unable to discover the peace and joy which is our own nature we become afflicted with numerous unnecessary desires (*kāma*). Our lives become an agitated race in which we experience continuous anger *(krodha)* and frustration arising from the failure to attain our many desires.[17]

When the fundamental problem is defined to be one of ignorance, the basic solution is knowledge or wisdom (*jñāna*). In this particular case, knowledge is the proper understanding of myself as the *ātman* which is one with God and of the nature of joy and peace. This wisdom is gained through a competent teacher and the scripture. Knowledge is attained by the threefold processes of

listening attentively to the teacher, reflecting diligently on what has been heard, and working to assimilate this wisdom and to transform one's attitudes and habits on the basis of a new understanding.

To be effective, knowledge must make a difference. Our understanding of God, our true self, does not become knowledge (*jñāna*) in the true sense unless it makes a difference in our lives. It must free us from the fear of death, the anxiety of growing old, and must fill our lives with peace, joy and love for others. Love and compassion for others is a direct consequence of knowing the *ātman*, our true self, to be the same in everyone. Erroneous habits of thinking and action may persist even when wisdom has dawned in the mind. The inculcation of new habits of thought and action is the fruit of diligent and attentive work on ourselves. The end is *moksha* or liberation from unhappiness and discontent, a goal to be attained here and now.

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[16]*moha skala byādhinha kara mūlā*
tinha teṁ puni upajahiṁ bahu sūlā (Uttarakāṇḍa)
[17]See*Bhagavadgītā* 2:63-63.

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---------. *Ravava: Power Without Virtue.* Minnesota: Vijñāna Publications, 1996.

*Indicates translations used in this work. I have occasionally modified these where I felt the need to be more faithful to the meaning of the text.

The Seven Questions of Garuda

Anantanand Rambachan

Tulasidasa concludes the Ramayana with a lengthy conversation between Garuda, the king of birds, and Kakabhushundi, a crow. The fact that Garuda goes to a lowly crow for spiritual instruction is profoundly symbolic. A seeker of wisdom must be prepared to learn from any qualified source and a teacher must not be judged by outward appearance or by social status. It is the content of a teacher's wisdom and the quality of his or her character that matters. The dialogue between Garuda and Kakabhushundi focuses on the nature of God and the path of love. At one point in the conversation, however, Garuda places seven pointed questions before his eloquent teacher. His questions deal with the value and purpose of human existence, the greatest pain, the highest pleasure, the differences between the good and the evil, the highest virtue, the worst sin, and the diseases of the mind.

The Seven Questions of Garuda is a detailed commentary on these questions and answers which cover many central aspects of Hindu belief and ethics.

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